

# HOW TO PUNCTUATE YOUR PROBLEMS

## ROMANS 8:28-29

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

This morning I want to start with an exercise...

When you came in this morning you were given a piece of paper. And on this paper are four lines of what appear to be a random collection of simple words.

It's a jumble of sixteen words - *let me read it* - **that that is is that - that is not is not is - not that it it is**

I think we'd all agree that's a nonsensical sentence.

*What did that do for you? What did it mean to you? I can tell you the answer... absolutely nothing.*

But here's what we're going to do - I want you to get out a pen and follow some instructions. We're going to make a few insertions into this nonsensical string of words... *(If you didn't get a handout when you came in, or don't have a pen, follow along on the big screen.)*

**First**, I want you to put quotation marks in front of the "first that" and the "last is." **Second**, capitalize three letters - *just scratch over the lower case letter and turn it into an uppercase.* Capitalize the first letter in the "first that" - the first letter in the "fifth is" - and the first letter in the "last it."

Capitalize the “*first that,*” “*fifth is,*” and “*last it.*” **Third**, I want you to insert two commas and a dash. The commas go after the “*first is*” - and the “*first not.*” Put the dash after the “*second is.*”

**Finally**, let's add an exclamation point, a period, and a question mark. Put the exclamation point after the “*second not.*” The period goes between the “*last is,*” and the “*last quotation mark.*” And then insert the question mark after the “*first it.*” *Okay, you've got it.*

Now having added the capitalization and punctuation let's read these 16 words again: “**That that is, is - that that is not, is not! Is not that it? It is.**” Suddenly, our nonsensical sentence now makes some sense!

We just read the exact same 16 words, in the same order - but with the insertions we made what seemed like a random collection of words now finds meaning.

Well, today I want to teach you **how to punctuate your problems.** Right now your life might appear to be a jumble of obstacles, and difficulties, and stressful circumstances. Your life doesn't make a lot of sense.

Randomness tends to rule. You are perplexed and distressed. You have to *confess...* your life is a *mess!*

Once, Charlie Brown and Lucy were into a heavy philosophical conversation. Lucy made an astute observation, “**Life is like a deck chair, Charlie Brown. Some place it so they can see where they're going; some place it so they can see where they've been; and some place it so they can see where they're at.**”

Charlie Brown thinks for a minute, and then he responds, *"Yes, but I can't even get mine unfolded."*

Perhaps you feel like confusion is your roommate. You can't even get your deck chair unfolded.

At times your life resembles a knot that refuses to untangle. It's a dilemma - a real quandary... **but that's because you haven't punctuate your life properly.**

This morning we're going to take *your string of struggles - your jumble of circumstances* - and make a few insertions... we'll place quotation marks at the beginning and end - add a couple of capitalizations - a few commas and dashes scattered throughout - an exclamation point - a period - and a question mark...

Hey, when you make the proper insertions, instantly your life takes on a whole new meaning. Romans 8:28-29 provides us God's rules for punctuation...

First, let's take your string of problems and add some **quotation marks... God says... not Sandy says - not some counselor says - not a friend trying to cheer you up says - not some positive thinking aficionado says - no, God the Holy Spirit Himself says... "All things work together for good to those who love God..."**

I want you to put the problems you're facing between two quotation marks. The situations you're dealing with have been ordained by God. God hasn't necessarily caused them... but He's at the very least allowed them.

I believe that God is over the affairs of men. As a result, **nothing gets to me that doesn't first pass through Him.** Before a trial touches me it first has to get divine authorization - and before God sends it on, He attaches to it a purpose He wants to work in my life.

Our problems take on a completely different meaning when we wrap them between divine quotation marks.

On the town square in Enterprise, Alabama there's a monument to the boll weevil. Years ago this farming town made its living off King Cotton; until a swarm of boll weevils invaded, and threatened permanent ruin.

As it turned out the *enterprising* farmers of *Enterprise* were forced to switch to peanuts that year. And to their surprise, when harvest came they made more money from the peanuts than they'd ever made from cotton.

They never went back to cotton. The blight of the boll weevil became a bonanza to the town's economy.

And to acknowledge their appreciation the farmers set up a statue on the square. Go to Enterprise today, and you'll see a monument to the boll weevil... Hey, God has not fallen asleep at the helm. He is in control!

God wants to turn *your disappointments* into *divine appointments*. Nothing happens to a child of God that God isn't willing to transform into something good.

I have a sign I found years ago, that I keep in my office, **"God is greater than any problem that I have."**

Think of it, the very thing that is today creating the stress in your life - the anguish in your heart - will one day be a cause

of great rejoicing. Your source of misery will become a monument to God's faithfulness!

Now, let's go back to our long *string of struggles*, and as we did with our string of words - let's **capitalize two words for emphasis**... God works "**All Things**" together for good - notice it's not just a "*few things*" or "*some things*" or even "*most things*" - it's "**All Things.**"

Recently, an art gallery in Alexandria Virginia hosted a junk art exhibition. For \$3000 you could purchase a full-length woman's coat knitted out of plastic garbage bags... The show included model airplanes made from beer cans... A lamp made from an old bowling ball...

Sculptures made from rusted picture frames, clock parts, saw blades, truck panels, sardine cans, tea bags, and even Band-Aid wrappers. The exhibit gave new meaning to the phrase, "**trash art.**"

But understand, God is into trash art!

God wants to take the trash in our lives - *shattered dreams, scarred memories, broken hearts, battered hopes* - and turn them into something... oh, so good!

He wants to take what we consider the junk in our life and turn it into valuable and beautiful pieces of art!

Sometimes life is like trying to work a thousand piece jigsaw puzzle, without the box top. It's tough to arrange the individual pieces when you lack the big picture.

But God sees the box top. He has His eyes on the end result. He sees the picture, and He alone can work the puzzle and fit all the pieces into their proper place.

A pastor once went to console a husband and wife that was grieving the tragic loss of their baby. *And trust me, from a pastor's perspective those kinds of moments are horribly awkward. Everything you think to say runs the risk of coming across trite and insensitive.*

This particular pastor was groping for words when a woven bookmark fell from His Bible. On one side it was a tangled web of thread - on the other side were the embroidered words, "God is love." And this is true for us. From our perspective life is confusing, but from God's perspective He's working "*all things for good.*"

Reinhold Messner is a famous mountain climber.

He was the first of two men to scale Mount Everest without an oxygen tank. Then he decided he needed to climb the mountain by himself - and he succeeded.

Afterwards, Messner was asked the stock question all mountain climbers get asked, "*Why did you do it?*" He replied, "*Because at the top all the lines converge.*"

And this is true in life. Our lives are a portrait God is in the process of painting, and no matter how random the lines seem at times eventually every brush stroke comes together just as God intended. Not *a few, or some, or even most...* but capitalize those two important words, "*All Things... work together.*"

And we also need to sprinkle **a few commas and dashes** throughout our problems. Remember High School English... commas and dashes are connectors that link together different thoughts in a sentence.

And this is what God does with our problems. Rather than stand alone, they all link up and work together.

In verse 28, the Greek term translated **"work together"** is the word **"sunergeo"** - from which we get our English word **"synergy."** Here's how Webster's defines **"synergy"** - it's the **"cooperative action of various elements to produce an effect greater than, and different from, the sum of each element acting separately"** In other words, **"we can do more together than we can apart,"** or **"two heads are better than one."**

Take for example your common table salt...

Salt is the cooperative action of two elements that are poisonous by themselves - *sodium and chloride*.

Consume either elements alone and it would prove deadly, but both of them working together overcomes their harmful effects and creates something beneficial.

*And this is what God does....* He takes the various circumstances of our lives and creates a synergistic effect. He brings together problematic circumstances and distressing situations, in a way that the ultimate, over-all, in-the-end outcome is good and productive.

Ladies, you're in the kitchen baking a cake - when I walk in and start sampling the ingredients... I taste a pinch of baking soda, then sip some extract, I munch a handful of flour, and

swallow a cup of raw eggs - *and it doesn't take long before I'm sick to my stomach.*

By themselves - on their own - none of the cake ingredients taste very good, but if I allow you to mix the the components together according to the recipe - and then give them sufficient time to bake - eventually I'll enjoy a delicious dessert that's a pleasure to taste.

*And this is what God does!* Many of our experiences, if taken on their own taste bitter and make us nauseous. But God takes the ingredients - mixes them all together according to His recipe - then bakes them thoroughly - and turns them into a tasty outcome.

Once, a sailor was stranded on a desert island.

It was a daily struggle just to survive. After several weeks he managed to build a make-shift hut which protected him from the brutal weather, and provided him a place to store the food he could gather.

One day the cast-away was out searching for more food, when he noticed a fire rising above the trees.

He raced back in the direction toward his hut, only to find it engulfed in flames. He sunk into a depression. All he had worked for had suddenly gone up in smoke.

The next morning though, the sailor spied a ship sailing towards the island. It was a rescue party.

When he asked the captain how he knew he was on the island, the captain said he'd seen the signal fire.

What the sailor interpreted as a catastrophe - what caused him a deep depression - had actually been his salvation! God



mixes apparent tragedies, with right circumstances, and good timing to work His purposes.

***Right now that's what He's up to in your life!***

God works "**all things together for good!**"

You gotta believe it... all that's coming down in your life is happening to you for *your good* and for *God's glory!* This is why we need to add **an exclamation point!** Here's a promise to get excited about!

Of course, the word "**good**" is a relative term... What's good to you may not be good to me.

For example you might enjoy butterscotch candy, you think it tastes good - but I hate butterscotch. I'd rather suck on pigs' feet than eat butterscotch candy.

God works all things together for "**good**" as He defines "**good**" - not necessarily as we define it.

If you read this verse, and think "**good**" means an *easy-going, smooth-sailing, trouble-free* life for you and yours - if you think it means fat bank accounts, and rungs up the corporate ladder, and never a conflict with the people you love; then you're misreading the verse.

***Nothing in life grows without struggle and pain.***

God's "**good**" is not a continual picnic-in-the-park. It's us moving into His will, getting somewhere, taking-strides, stretching our faith, building up His kingdom.

Romans 8:28 is one of the most misread verses in all the Bible. Folks quote it as if it said, "[all things work together for my good](#)" - but that's not how it reads!

God's goal is not just *your good* - it is for *your good*, plus *my good*, plus *His good*. God is at work in our circumstances to achieve a mixture of *your good*, *other people's gain*, and *His glory*! God's intention is never some cheap, superficial, selfish version of good...

God wants to produce a solid, eternal good!

Once a professor at Georgia Tech said to a student, "[Son, you don't have enough sense to stand on the corner and sell hotdogs.](#)" After flunking out of Tech the boy decided to do just that! He threw up a shack on North Avenue and started selling hotdogs and burgers.

The year was 1928. The student's name was "[Frank Gordy.](#)" And he named his hotdog stand, "[The Varsity.](#)"

Irvin Walker told me the story of Frank Gordy. Irvin worked at the Varsity for the 44 years. On one of my visits, he told me the Varsity had made Gordy a multi-millionaire, but it had also helped him provide for all twelve of his children. The blessing had a ripple effect

Frank Gordy's failure was not only his own goldmine, it was a blessing to Irvin and other employees like him.

In fact there's another man - *his name is Pastor Sandy* - and he says that Frank Gordy's restaurant has provided him countless hours of dining pleasure.

My point is, Frank Gordy's misfortune became a chain reaction of good. It became a blessing for Frank Gordy - for

Irvin Walker - for the 12 Walker kids - and for Sandy Adams - and even my wife and grandsons.

On a more serious note, Myra Welch, the famous poet was once interviewed. Ms. Welch wrote the poem, "[The Touch of the Master's Hand](#)" - a ballad that has warmed hearts, and encouraged millions of people.

When the interview was over, the reporter went to leave, but the elderly Ms. Welch stopped him. She patted her wheelchair, and said, "[I also want to thank God for this, if I'd never been confined to a wheelchair I would never have cultivated my love for poetry.](#)"

To Ms. Welch, God turned the symbol of her weakness, *her wheelchair*, into strength for thousands.

Initially, God's work may seem harsh. The storm clouds appear dark, heavy, threatening. But God's clouds always contain a silver lining. Good eventually rises out of the storm. Trust Him. He sees to it that "[all things work together for good... to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.](#)"

I want you to notice though that God's promise is not an open-ended offer. There's [a period](#) at the end of the promise. This word of hope only applies to those who "[love God](#)" and "[are called according to His purpose.](#)"

You might say, "[Well, I love God, but I'm not really sure about His will for my life? What is God's purpose for me?](#)" Well, in verse 29 Paul lays out God's will for all of us "[to be conformed to the image of His Son.](#)"

**God's purpose for you and me, is to make us like Jesus.**  
If this is your goal, then you can be certain that *"all things will work together for good."*

So often we think of the will of God as *a specific activity, or a given place, or a relationship with another person* - when in reality the will of God is **a process**.

God's will is not a destination - as much as it is the journey itself - *and the person God plans to make us along the way.* God fashions us into the image of His Son! He wants *our manners to be full of grace, our voice full of His love, our countenance full of His glory.*

God wants us to *circulate* the warmth of Christ, and *emanate* the strength of Christ, and *radiate* the goodness of Christ, and *articulate* the truth of Christ.

God wants His servants to take after their Master.

If you trust in Jesus, then inwardly God has made you a new creation - **dead to sin and alive to God.**

Now God wants all that new life to ooze out of your spiritual pores into your attitudes and actions.

When Michelangelo finished his famous statue of David, the great sculptor was asked how he'd created such a masterpiece. He replied, **"I saw a figure trapped in the stone, and I chiseled away the rock to free it."**

*And this is how God looks at you...*

He sees the inner man - you've been made perfect and righteous through the blood of Jesus - but it's surrounded by rough, shapeless rock - *i.e. the flesh.*

So God chips and chisels to free the inner man from its fleshly prison. He shapes our attitudes and actions until they reveal the new creation we are in Christ.

Other people may see you as a lump of stone - *a real blockhead, perhaps* - or they may *take you for granite* - but God sees you as you really are ***in Christ***.

And He's determined to sculpt and mold you until *the life people see reflects the person that you truly are*.

In verse 29, the word translated "**conform**" is the Greek word "**morphos**." It's the word from which we get our English term "**metamorphosis**." A metamorphosis is "*a striking, or apparent change - an alteration of type.*"

When a wormy-looking caterpillar turns into a colorful, flittering butterfly we call it a metamorphosis.

Here's another example... when a rock becomes a crystal it's labeled a metamorphic rock. In Geology 101 we were taught that the formation of metamorphic rock involves three elements: **heat**, **water**, and **pressure**.

And in a spiritual sense the same three ingredients work to change us... The **heat** is the presence of the Holy Spirit. He softens us, and burns off the impurities from our lives... The **water** is God's Word, which cleanses our thinking... And the **pressure** is what Paul is discussing in verse 29. God pressures us with difficulties that morph us into people of character.

And understand God doesn't flinch in this work.

He's not the least bit timid, or squeamish, or hesitant to use a little momentary pain or pressure to shape and fashion a permanent change in our lives.

CS Lewis once said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures. He speaks to us in our conscience. But He shouts to us in our pain. Pain is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Spiritually speaking, pleasure lulls us to sleep, but it's pain that grabs our attention!

It reminds me of a poem by Robert Browning Hamilton, "I walked a mile with Pleasure; she chatted all the way - But left me none the wiser for all she had to say - I walked a mile with Sorrow and ne'er a word said she - But, oh, the things I learned from her when Sorrow walked with me!" God even uses our sorrows.

The cocoon of the emperor moth is funnel-shaped.

When it's time for the moth to leave the cocoon it rises through its narrow neck. The moth squeezes through until it escapes. Scientists tell us the pressure that the cocoon applies to the moth's body, as it compresses through the narrow channel, is God's way of releasing the juices that fill the vessels in its wings.

This ultimately causes the wings to fully develop.

Once a little boy saw an emperor moth struggling to shed its cocoon and fly to freedom. Out of pity he took some scissors, and snipped the threads of the cocoon to make its exit easier. But without the pressure, the wings were never allowed to properly develop, and the moth spent his brief life crawling, rather than flying.

And what a lesson for us. When we try to escape life's pressures, and run from the struggle, we never develop properly. We crawl spiritually, rather than soar!

I really like the following saying, "God puts you in a fix, to fix you, not the fix. If you try to fix the fix God puts you in, He's got to put you in another fix to fix the fix He wanted to fix in the first place." I hope you got it, let's try it again (repeat)... God uses trials to fix us.

Finally, place at the end of your *string of struggles* a **question mark**. Certainly, verse 28 is true, but the question is, *are we going to believe it and embrace it?*

Verse 28 assumes that we know it's truth. Paul says, "**And we know all things work together for good.**"

There are some things in life *we don't know*, some things *we can't know*, and some things *we should know*, but there are a few things ***we do know!***

And this is one of them. Every believer should be clear and certain, "**all things work together for good.**"

Paul is saying this is a truth we should realize even if the book of Romans had never been written. This is a truth a Christian should discern intuitively. It's not just a lesson we learn, it is a truth we sense deep inside us.

*And why?* Because every Christian has been to the cross... At Calvary, God set a pattern. He took history's *greatest tragedy*, and turned it into our *greatest victory*.

What appeared to be *a catastrophe, an ugly upset, a devastating defeat* - God worked together for good!

Through the death of His Son, He brought salvation to the world. Truly, **"All things worked together for good."** You might say, God makes a living at taking over sad stories and giving them happy endings!

Paul reminds you and me, **"we know"** this wonderful truth... and he's right - I know it, and you know it... *we just don't always want to admit that we know it....*

Rather than rise up in faith, and grab hold of the comfort in this verse, we tend to enjoy a good sulk.

We prefer to whine, and snivel, and gripe, and complain about our circumstances - and *"the bum rap"* we've gotten. We love to throw a good pity party.

Recall the story of Joseph. His brothers hated him. He was their *father's favorite*. They wanted to snuff Joseph out, instead they ended up selling him to slave traders headed for Egypt. When they returned home they lied to their dad, Jacob, and told him their younger sibling was dead. He'd been eaten by wild animals.

The Bible tells us that through a miraculous turn of events Joseph prospered in Egypt, and eventually rose to second in command in pharaoh's royal court.

When famine fell on the region, Jacob's sons came to Egypt looking for food. Joseph had rationed the nation's grain, and Egypt enjoyed a surplus. It was ironic, but Jacob's sons made their request for grain to none other than their long, lost brother, Joseph.

And when Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers, he sums up his painful past and excruciating experiences. **"You**



meant it for evil; but God meant it for good, in order... to save many people." Joseph rejoiced that his trials had resulted in good for a whole nation.

It's interesting though, Joseph's father, Jacob, expressed the opposite attitude. Earlier in the story, before Joseph had revealed his actual identity, he made his brothers return to dad and bring his youngest brother, Benjamin. He also kept Simeon as a hostage.

And when Jacob was told what happened, he cried out, "Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin away. *All these things are against me.*" What was Jacob saying? In essence, he's saying that **all things don't work together for good!**

Jacob was denying Romans 8:28, and calling God a liar. *Jacob are you nuts?* I'm sure Jacob knew in his heart that his God works all things together for good, but at that moment he just didn't want to fess up.

He liked *belly-aching over promise-taking!*

Understand, when you cry, "woe is me," you *deny* "great is God." Satan calls out to all God's children, "Come unto me all you who are grieved and peeved, and I'll sympathize with your bitterness." It's been said, "Self pity always weeps on the devil's shoulder."

We need to stop painting ourselves out to be a *victim* when God is in the process of making us a *victor*.

Well, the way to make sense out of your nonsensical circumstances is to insert the proper punctuation!



Punctuate your problems according to Romans 8:28 and the outlook will change. Dilemmas, and difficulties, and hardships will take on a whole new meaning.

Wrap your problems between divine **quotation marks**. **God Himself makes us this promise!**

Second, **capitalize** the **"All"** in your circumstances...

Third, **use a few commas and dashes** to string together various situations... it all works in synergy...

Fourth, drop in the **exclamation point** - *good is the goal* even when it means a little pain... And remember, God's top objective is to make us like Jesus... **period.**

Then lastly, don't forget the **question mark!** Yes, you know this verse is true, but are you going to embrace it, and live it, and trust in it, and praise the Lord for it?

Let me repeat, *are you a belly-acher, or a promise-taker?* Punctuate your problems with Romans 8:28, and your problems will no longer be such problems!